

Daily Herald, September 19, 2007

U.S. Marine Staff Sgt. Enrico "Harry" Fontana returned from the Korean War in 1952 troubled by his thoughts and unable to sleep.

People called his condition battle fatigue back then, or combat stress. Only decades later was Fontana's problem diagnosed as post-traumatic stress disorder.

Fontana, now a 77-year-old Mundelein resident, has sought assistance for his disorder and other health issues at the Veterans Affairs Medical Center in North Chicago, the only hospital of its kind in Lake County.

He was among the many area veterans who were shocked and angered by a 1999 VA report recommending eliminating critical-care services and other operations at the hospital.

Veterans needing medical help no longer offered at North Chicago would have to go to facilities in Milwaukee, Maywood or Chicago, the report said.

"I was very, very upset," Fontana recalled. "There were a lot of veterans up here who needed it, and we didn't have anywhere to go."

Incredibly, eight years later, the hospital's future is brighter than ever, thanks to veterans like Fontana and area lawmakers who stridently advocated against the cuts. They brokered deals that ensured the hospital would stay open and paved the way for an unprecedented merger with the nearby Great Lakes Naval Station's hospital, one that, in 2010, will result in the nation's first VA/Navy medical complex.

A milestone in the center's rebirth will come early next month when officials unveil its new

name.

Fontana insists he fought to save the VA not just for veterans of his generation but also for those coming home now from Iraq and Afghanistan -- and those who'll return from future wars.

"When you sign that paper and pledge to lay your life down for your country, that's a contract. And I damn near did a couple of times," Fontana said. "And when I come back ... I want what is coming to me."

Cuts threatened

Founded in 1926, the VA hospital is on a roughly 100-acre campus on Green Bay Road at Route 137.

Business has consistently increased in recent years, reports show. More than 30,000 patients have been treated there already this fiscal year, thousands more than were seen in the entire previous year.

The vast majority of patients seek outpatient medical care, but the VA typically treats more than 4,000 veterans on an inpatient basis annually, too.

The fate of the hospital was called into question in the late 1990s when federal officials announced funding woes could prompt service cuts in the Chicago area.

Although closing the hospital was discussed, a VA committee eventually recommended relocating inpatient critical, psychiatric and nursing home cases to other area hospitals.

The report cited a declining veteran population as a reason to consolidate services, but that

simply wasn't the case in Lake County, said U.S. Rep. Mark Kirk, a Highland Park Republican who's been one of the hospital's loudest supporters.

The veteran population here actually was rising at the time, Kirk said, in part because many veterans were moving to Chicago's suburbs. The proximity of the Great Lakes naval base was another factor, he said.

"(The report) was obviously written by someone who didn't know this area," said Kirk, a combat veteran who serves in the Navy Reserve.

The announced cuts -- and the reasons behind them -- enraged many Lake County veterans.

"They told us the veteran population was going to go down," Fontana said. "And we told them, 'You're nuts!' "

Driving to Chicago or Maywood for services would have been an inconvenience for many veterans and an ordeal for some, said 79-year-old Army veteran Lester Thorstad of Mundelein.

"It's a long way down there," said Thorstad, who fought in the Korean and Vietnam wars. "I've had knee problems and arthritis. ... It would have been a hardship."

The VA's staff -- mostly local civilians, some who'd worked there for decades -- was worried, too.

"Morale here was low," longtime spokesman Doug Shouse said. "It was just a roller coaster ride for everybody."

Working together

Fontana and other veterans united to fight the cuts. They garnered support from lawmakers such as Sen. Dick Durbin and Kirk's predecessor, Rep. John Porter.

By year's end, the hospital's supporters had a new plan: a deal calling for certain services to be shared with the Great Lakes medical facility.

The fusion seemed like a perfect solution, and not just because the hospitals are less than a mile apart. At the same time the VA was considering downsizing the North Chicago complex, the Navy was weighing a costly rehabilitation of the Great Lakes hospital.

The agreement didn't fully shield the VA hospital from potential federal cutbacks, however. So upon joining Congress in 2001, Kirk made securing the long-term future of the VA hospital a priority.

A key victory came in 2003 when the Navy agreed to move the mental health unit at Great Lakes to the VA.

"I knew the tide had turned," Kirk recalled. "There was no way they would close (a facility) treating active Navy personnel."

The \$13 million expansion of the VA facility's operating and emergency rooms in 2004 further ensured the hospital will remain open, Kirk said.

A model hospital

But the best is yet to come, hospital advocates insist.

In 2005, military and government officials inked a deal to fully integrate both hospitals by 2010.

When completed, the facility will serve an estimated 50,000 Lake County veterans and 30,000 active-duty recruits annually. It also will be the nation's first VA/Navy medical complex and promises to be a model for facilities elsewhere.

"It's not going to be called a Navy clinic and it's not going to be the North Chicago VA," Shouse said. "It's going to be ... a federal health care facility."

Patients at the future hospital won't know if their doctors or nurses are from the VA organization or the Navy, Kirk said.

"This (will be) a completely combined institution," he said.

This summer, dignitaries broke ceremonial ground on the latest phase of the \$130 million project: a new parking garage, hospital entrance and ambulatory care center.

Local veterans are excited about the forthcoming amalgamation.

"It's a lot better working together than being separate and not making it," Thorstad said.

Navy veteran Jim Heier of Vernon Hills campaigned to save the hospital, too. Heier, who saw combat during World War II aboard the USS Corregidor escort carrier, admitted having doubts about whether they could win the fight.

"I think a little angel came down to Earth and said, 'Hey, you guys need some help -- here it is,' " Heier said.

An important step in the hospital's evolution will come Oct. 5 when lawmakers and representatives from the Pentagon and VA gather in North Chicago to announce the name the new facility will adopt after the merger.

Shouse is keeping the moniker under wraps, hinting only the hospital will be named after someone local. Coming up with that new, singular identity -- even though the facility won't officially open for another three years -- is vital, he said.

"There are two different cultures that will have to meld or blend together and work together to form one organization," Shouse said. "This is our way of starting to move together."

Area veterans are grateful for the effort.

"It's fulfilling promises," said former Grayslake Trustee Charles Lucas, who served in the Army during World War II and was taken prisoner during the Battle of the Bulge. "It really makes veterans feel pretty darn good."

Quick facts about the VA hospital

- Proper name: North Chicago VA Medical Center
- Location: 3001 Green Bay Road, North Chicago
- Opened: 1926
- Total beds: 498

- Budget: \$171 million
- Outpatient visits: 214,559*
- Inpatients treated: 4,643*
- Unique patients: 28,545*
- Staff: 1,163**

*For 2006 fiscal year

**Full-time equivalents

Sources: North Chicago VA Medical Center, Daily Herald interviews